

DEALING WITH DISTRACTIONS IN MEDITATION (PO03)

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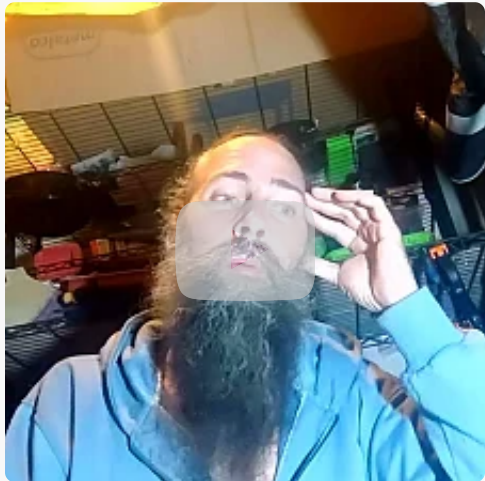
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We explore a range of methods and strategies for dealing with distracting thoughts and external disturbances during our practice of meditation. From non-reactivity to breathwork, to modulating mental spaces, objects of attention and modes of practice; into evaluation, deconstruction and termination when distractions still persist.



For distracting thoughts, we cover:

- Ignoring: Neutral Reaction (Inconsequential and transitory)
- Returning to Breath (Establishing basic calmness)
- Switching the Meditation Object (When directly linked to distraction)
- Transforming the Mental Space (Uplifting lethargy, dampening hyperactivity)
- Altering the Meditation Object Modality (Pacing, pitch, focal length, etc.)
- Evaluating the Merit (Worthy: Welcome but postponed; Unworthy: Repudiated)
- Deconstructing the Formation (Analyzing our attachment, root and formation of thought)
- Overpowering and Obliterating (Last resort measure: Elimination through raw power)

For distracting sensations, we cover:

- Choosing the Practice Location (Reasonably free of inbound sensations)
- Practicing Tolerance and Indifference (Non-reactive attitude)
- Modulating Sensory Focus (Distant/near/intermediate, quiet/loud, etc.)
- Dampening the Senses (Blindfold, earmuffs, blanket, etc.)
- Changing the Practice Location (Excessive intrusion into the senses)
- Re-evaluating the Problem (External or internal)

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Welcome to the storehouse, the warehouse. Every sort of clutter from clamps to laundry from the Christmas of yesteryear to drills to every sort of shit abounds. This is your mind. Okay?

Our minds are entirely stuffed and cluttered with every sort of thing accumulated since the dawn of our existence – and as such, when we're sitting down for a

lofty meditation, it's quite natural that distracting thoughts will emerge. Okay?

Dealing with Distracting Thoughts

Now how do we deal with distracting thoughts? That's the topic of today's review. There are a significant number of steps you can take, depending on the condition.

We'll walk through them one by one. Measures you can apply in order to return your wandering mind back to where it belongs, into your practice of contemplation, your meditation. Okay?

Just Let It Pass – No Reaction, Never Mind!

So the first thing, here's a drifter emerging – a thought, any random thought, coming, making itself known. So what do I do? Oh, just absolutely nothing, right? Thoughts floating around in the canvas of the mind are always there by their nature. They're coming, they're going, they're rising, they're falling. Just acknowledge them – okay?

Here's a thought of a sunny afternoon in the Central Park. Okay? Whatever. Arose, it's passing, transiting,

and out it goes. Attach no meaning to it, it's not important. It's as good and as bad as the other thought. It's entirely neutral, we have no particular valence to it, no response, no reaction. Let it rise, let it fall, let it go away. Don't confront it, don't pursue it. Just allow it to pass. Just passing by.

Hey, here's a thought coming. Okay. Thought going. Okay. Whatever. Back to where I was, without attaching to the passing of the thought – without thinking, "I am distracted, I am troubled by my mind". All of that takes you on a tangent, it takes you on a sidetrack. It diverts you from what you're supposed to be doing, that simply compounding of distraction if you begin to self-examine and analyze at this point, when the initial simple measure is simply: Ignore, neutral, let it pass. Okay?

Seek Background Support from Peaceful Breath

Now, if it's going on in orbits, we can briefly return to the breath. Holding on to our, whatever that we're contemplating, but also attending to the breath. Peaceful, drawn-out breath – with a little pause at the end, a little pause at the start – as in pauses between

inhale and exhale, at both ends. They tend to level the mind just a notch, just enough to let all of these random drifters fade out, dissipate, not descend into our active field of awareness. Alright? So there's breathing.

Now, suppose the breathing doesn't function. Then what? Then we've got a more troublesome thought here that we need to deal with, and we need a bit more of an inquiring approach into it. As in we need to sidetrack a little bit in order to actually deal with what appears to be a situation.

Adjust or Switch Your Object of Attention

Now suppose the thoughts that are still bothering us, they are linked to the object we are contemplating. Suppose we are contemplating on the human body itself. There is a muscular man, there is an attractive, alluring woman, and we begin to compare ourselves to these. We begin to associate ourselves, what if I were to spend time with this attractive woman? What if I were to engage in sports with this muscular man? How would I fare? How would I feel?

These are drawn directly from the object that you are contemplating. Now at that point, you may switch the

object. You may, in this case for example from the human body in itself, you may simply return to a contemplation where you are not going entirely out of it. We are simply backing down, raising up, adapting.

For example, the bones, the skeleton in here. There is my skull under these muscles, there is a structure of bones, and I contemplate on these bones alone. Or I bring my attention to my heart. There is a pulsing, beating heart, blood coursing through my veins and arteries, still within the realm of the human body that we attended to in the beginning when the disturbing, distracting thoughts arose. But however, on this level we have eliminated the source of distraction.

The blood flowing in the veins of the beautiful woman, the muscular man, the other creature we may be distracted by. It's all the same. The bones, the skeleton. I am not going to be wanting to hang out or wrestle with a skeleton. There is more peace in that abiding. So we can switch the object.

Tune the Mental Space – Use of Catalytic Breath

Now suppose another case. The distraction may simply be rooted in our mental space. We may be on the tired

side, we may be worn out, fatigued, and as such drifting into a more dreamy state where all sorts of material is rising from the subconscious mind. Or we may be hyper-attentive, still engaged with today's activities and a bit on a hyper. And as such we are prone to track down more distracting thoughts.

This mental space in itself then is the cause of our distraction and should be modulated, brought to a middle ground where it is neither too tired or too hyper. And now there are many ways of doing this, but one is simply the use of the breath. All right? Suppose I were to, in a case where I am lethargic, I am distracted and floating because of tiredness, whether proper tiredness or just sloth.

In that case, inhale, pull my chest out, snap my neck, lift myself upward, take a deep inhale, lock it in the chest, and there is an accumulation of energy in the cranium, an accumulation of vitality that helps uplift us from the realm of sloth and torpor. On the other hand, we are too hyper. Okay? The opposite. We exhale and we slump down. Drop down, head to the floor, holding the breath, locking it after the exhale. In there, the

patterns and the waves, rapid in the mind, begin to die down.

These are very much like the breaths and movements of life, enlivenment, and death, termination. We can make use of these in order to control the space of the mind. All right?

Modulate the Focal Modes of Your Engagement

Then again, there is the case where the distraction tendency is related to the mode in which we engage with the object. Suppose, for example, we are engaging a mantra in our meditation.

One breath and one mantra. "So'ham." However, the temper of our mind is too fast and it takes opportunities to divert from the middle of that long-stretching recitation. In that case, we simply up the pace. "So'ham – so'ham – so'ham – so'ham". Right?

And again, if we have been doing more rapid repetition, "So'ham-so'ham-so'ham-so'ham-so'ham-so'ham-so'ham", and this in itself is becoming overstimulating, then we simply slow it down. Again, if a low pitch, "so'ham", is making us sleepy, then we up the pitch.

And "so'ham", if the high pitch is resulting in a hyperactivation, then we lower the pitch, we modulate the object mode.

Another example, suppose we are contemplating on something as simple as the color of white. All right? A very monotonic base object. And the mind will certainly find it easy to divert, looking for plurality, looking for stimulation. Then we take an object that is white, that is more explicit.

What is white? A glass of milk is white. A skull is white. They still retain the whiteness we attend to, but they have more attributes that engage more of the faculties of the mind. We can reflect on the attributes and the whiteness in our object. These sorts of strategies are possible in modifying the modality of the object that we are engaged in, without breaking from the object. All right?

Persistent Thought – Confront and Evaluate

And now suppose there are still thoughts buzzing around, hovering, drifting, distracting us, pulling us away, pushing us somewhere. Then, more serious measures. Now suppose there is still a thought that

persists, a more resilient thought. Then first of all, we should examine. This thought here before me. Is it worthy or is it unworthy?

Now what is a worthy thought? An inspiration coming to us that would, at another time, in its right place, be something very meaningful, something worthwhile. Now thank you, thought, for presenting yourself. When your time and season comes, when your space and context are present, we will deal with you, and we will make the best of you. Thank you.

And if you find that these sorts of inspirations come frequently, then by all means, have a notepad for scribbling things down – so you get them out of your head, on the paper, instead of retaining them throughout your meditation, until the end, because you find that you shouldn't let them go, because they're actually good stuff. So, on the paper, note it down. Finished for now. Later, we return back to the pad of inspirations, and for now, we attend to our practice.

On the other hand, unworthy thoughts. That person said this and that, and I should have this and that, and why did I not get, and have, and this and that – and random emotions, cravings, haunting us. Now these are

unworthy material, and they should be declared as such.

Why the hell do I need to attend to an interaction? That has already happened. It is what it is. Done with it, and onward into a better life. These negative thoughts bring no good to me. They bring me no peace, they bring me no concentration, and they compromise my future ability. So just go away. Don't bother me. You are not worth being. Okay? So, repudiation, or recognition of merits, as another step in dealing with the resilient distractions.

Very Persistent Thought – Trace and Deconstruct

Now, suppose this positive or this negative thought is still haunting us, does not want to let go. We need to take it a notch deeper, again, and reflect on its origins, on its formation. So, this thought before me, first of all, why does it persist? It would not persist if I had no attachment to it.

So, I have an attachment to this particular thing. Somewhere into my mental structures, it is deeply linked, and therefore keeps on arising and does not

want to let go. So, let me examine my attachment and clear it.

Again, from what specific root does this thought come from? I examine that root, and from that root I examine the formation of this particular thought. How, for example, I encounter it in my perception, how I deal with it in my field of reactions, the meanings I assert to it, the confabulation that happens, compounding that particular thought.

All of these factors sustaining that thought, and these structures of the mind, layers, membranes of the mind, we will examine in more detail later. The bottom line here being, an introspective process into the formation of this particular thought, and through the process of deconstruction, cutting at whatever point of the cascade of its emergence.

It is not quite as simple as taking a couple of breaths, but sometimes it is a necessary process, a process that will become easier with more practice and more ability to perceive the contents of the mind. Alright?

End of Line — Brute Force of Total Concentration

Then finally, even if having pursued the thought to its roots, and witnessed the process of its formation, its genesis, and reflected on the attachment from our side that sustains it, that enables its existence, still we cannot overcome it. That's when we come to the end of the line here. When the gloves come off.

We use power, pure mental power, the raw collective ability of the mind.. Including the tensing of the physical body, clenching your teeth, lifting your tongue to the top of your palate, connecting the meridian from the cranium to the top, to the front, creating a circuit of power.

And simply by the pure force of concentration, throwing in everything we've got, we obliterate, we destroy that destructive thought. As if shooting out a laser that would drill a hole in the moon, that great of concentration, everything you've got. You cut it, you burn it, you blow it up, you destroy it, eliminate and obliterate.

Okay. And in this process you will feel that there is a certain unease building in the body. Your breath will grow a bit shorter, there may be palpitations in your

chest. We are using brute force. This is a last measure that we engage.

And suppose the more abstract application of pure power is elusive, then we may have also other devices or empowerments, so to say, at our disposal. States into which we enter as the protectors and destroyers, the guardians of the good process and the destroyers of all obstacles.

Suppose in here there is a thought that is rising and that is falling, as all thoughts do. Then here I am, time itself, the destroyer of all things, gnashing every thought between my teeth, devouring them, shitting them into the gutter. I transmute them and I overpower them by the nature of what I am.

Many other such devices. One may become a primordial black hole and from my event horizon, swallowing all things, no phenomena escapes, all thoughts are drawn into me and vanish in the void within me, etc. Those sorts of engagements are possible when we get to the point where the gloves come off, right?

Your Current Capacity and Gradual Improvement

And now this obviously depends on your capacity, your ability to overpower internal phenomena. And it is more than likely that there are times you will fail and you are haunted by this thought, regardless. Okay, so then it's fine. Do not feel that you are a failure, do not feel that it is pointless.

It's natural, we are engaged in practice, we are evolving, we are developing, and trial, error, eventually success. That is how life goes. So we retreat, recover, regain our strength, regain our energy, and get back to another session of meditation. Wiser from the experiences of the past, attending to what we do in our in-between meditation state, in order to wean out, to discourage, to dissipate the hold that the distracting thoughts hold upon us. Alright?

Dealing with Distracting Sensations

So in here, in a nutshell, methods on how to deal with distracting thoughts, bringing your mind into a calm state again, a state of concentration, intent and absorbed in practice. Alright? Then, on a footnote. Distracting thoughts, these are internal phenomena.

But while we are on the topic of distractions, we also have distracting sensations. We have visions, we have sounds, we have sensations, even tastes and smells, right? So, and they, through the five senses, enter into our consciousness — and when these sensory phenomena are loud enough, they can disturb our concentration, especially when our field of attention is still fragile.

Choose Your Location — Be Non-Reactive

Now, first of all, consider your location from the beginning. Choose a location where you are not bombarded by sounds, flickering of lights, intense weather, insects, etc., strong smells, and, well, assuming you are not eating while you are doing your

practice, you may simply have a lingering bad taste in your mouth that bothers you, in which case, go brush your teeth before you do your practice, right?

But basically, considering the location where, that is conducive to our practice, right? And I suppose there is still, there are sounds coming, like in here, you may have heard earlier, on the background, there was a lot of pa-dap-pa umpa-umpa-um coming from the neighbors, and that's fine. Now, it is something that I can easily be indifferent to. One sound is as good as the other.

However, sometimes sounds may be repetitive, as if they are drilling into your head, more troublesome. But often, sounds are something that will, when ignored, not attended to, not taken, not confronted, not taken as, "why are they playing this music", or "why is this bird so loud"? Not reacting, they will fade into the background and become invisible, will become transparent. You are no longer responding. All right? So that's there.

Modulate Perception or Dampen Your Senses

Suppose a sound, sound is the more likely adversary, compared to the other sense bases. Suppose there is a particular sound that keeps on asserting itself – then what you can do is you can modulate your sensory focus, your ears.

I'm hearing, but now I attend to things, only to things that I heard from far, far away, from a distance, or only to things that are very, very faint, ignoring attention to louder sounds. Or I attend to sounds that are very close to me, or only sounds that are very loud. Or only sounds that are intermediate, not too loud, not too quiet, somewhere in the middle ground between here and the far reach of my hearing ability. And by this, we compartmentalize the sense of hearing and the potential of distraction, and we train our internal sense, the sense receptor, to shift, to filter out the distractions. So, modulating the sensory focus. All right?

And now suppose that at times can be difficult. Difficult, in which case it may be necessary to actually dampen your senses – if you are unable to land at a better location, or where changing locations would basically be a hassle.

In which case, suppose there is, even with your eyes closed, there is a flickering of light that bothers you, or you find that you are inclined to open your eyes. Then take whatever fabric, turn it into a blindfold, a thick enough fabric, will also close your ears. Or have proper earmuffs, earplugs, or even simply plug your ears and close your eyes – and you will hear the blood coursing through your head, and your eyes will be enveloped in darkness and internal phenomena.

You can do that, to dampen the senses. Or, suppose you are outdoors, the wind is blowing harsh, inciting cold, unpleasant sensations. Many insects are crawling on my body, mosquitos are biting, flies are buzzing in my ears – in which case, have a blanket over you, have a shawl over you, simply shield your body. Simple. Take measures in order to dampen, to guard the sensory bases from excessive, more extreme disturbance. All right?

And now if then you still find that you are being distracted, then at that point we are no longer dealing with sensory distraction. Something else is going on, and it's time to re-evaluate your problem. You are more likely distracted by ideas of sounds, ideas of sights and

visions, and so on, and we return to the previous operating procedure. Dealing with distracting thoughts in and of themselves, independent of our external context of reference. All right?

In Summary – Methods for Overcoming Distracting Thoughts

So in here we covered some of the basics on how to get on top of your mind that is prone to be distracted by the countless contents coming in relentless waves, drawing our attention every which way.

Ignoring, neutral stance. Using the breath in order to stabilize the mind. Switching objects in a case where the distracting thought is intimately linked with the object itself. Modulating the mental space, arousing more alertness, vigilance – or dampening the hyper into a more withdrawn state, in order to prevent the rising of distracted thoughts from torpor or hyperactivity.

Again, object mode, modulation. A mantra more rapidly or more slowly, an object at more abstract or more explicit zoom. Then again, for the thoughts that persist – are they worthy or are they not, and dealing with them accordingly. The worthy ones, gratefully setting aside

for another time. The unworthy ones, discrediting, shaming and blaming them, casting them away as unfit for this being.

Then again, still persisting. Deconstructing the very formation, examining our attachment, examining the roots from which this distracting thought comes, and reviewing its entire formative process through the different layers of our being – and through that cutting, severing the links that sustain its cohesion.

And as the final measure – gloves come off, full exertion of all available power, mental and physical, in order to simply obliterate and eliminate the distracting thought.

All right, that should leave you with a couple of thoughts on how to deal with the various conditions of distraction – and hopefully these are useful in keeping you better in the zone, in the containment of your practice. Okay.

 <https://ananda.icu/talks/practice-series/p003-dealing-with-distractions-in-meditation>